# THE FIRST LESSON

When he heard the doorbell ring, Jim Stevens, co-principal trumpet of the Chicago Philharmonic, got up from his couch to let in his new student, Matthew Cohen. Jim knew little about Matthew other than that he was a supposedly gifted trumpeter and a high school senior. He also found the young man's tone of voice somewhat odd when he called for a lesson. That may not be too big of a deal, thought Jim at the time. There are many somewhat odd people in the music world.

Jim opened the door and both said hello, Matthew not giving Jim much eye contact and trembling a little.

"Go downstairs and warm up," said Jim. "I'll be down soon."

"Okay," replied Matthew in a breathy voice, still not looking at his new teacher.

Matthew trudged down the stairs to the basement which Jim used as his studio. There, Jim taught a number of students and studied scores. Unknown to Matthew, the lesson had already begun.

Matthew took a little time to stare with awe at pictures that were on the wall. Pictures of Jim playing the trumpet in concert attire. Pictures of famous conductors under whom Jim played, some of them autographed by those same conductors. Also, there were pictures of Jim himself standing on the podium, baton in hand. Matthew was just as overwhelmed as he was the day he called Jim to ask for a lesson.

Then the student took out his trumpet and, without warming up, tore into the Haydn Trumpet Concerto. His tone was solid if a bit tinny. His intonation left a bit to be

desired but was okay. Unfortunately, Matthew went right to some of the more technically difficult parts in the first movement, missing the highest notes repeatedly. Jim had seen many such students, higher education students as well as secondary school students. They want to make a big impression by showing that they can play the tough passages. Even though they can't. Not yet, at any rate.

After a few minutes, Jim had heard enough. He went downstairs to continue the lesson.

At the sound of Jim's footsteps, Matthew stopped playing and looked at the floor. He was still looking at the floor and was silent when Jim joined him at the music stand. The kid had no idea whether Jim would dub him either a hopeless case or the future of music. He hoped it would be a bit closer to the latter.

"Play a concert B-flat scale," said Jim in a deliberately not too forceful voice.

Matthew complied, utilizing much uneven vibrato and at high volume.

"Do it again, this time with no vibrato."

The student tried to do as he was told. The sound was still a little uneven. He then looked to Jim for his next command.

"Can you play a simple melody from memory?

Matthew immediately played "Blow the Man Down." But he did so with the same loudness and unsteadiness.

"Are you able to play the song on the mouthpiece alone?"

Matthew thought about it for a second. Then he took his mouthpiece out of his trumpet and played the song. He did so in the same key as he did with the mouthpiece in the horn.

"It is good," said Jim, "that you are able to play the mouthpiece in tune."

"I have perfect pitch!" announced Matthew.

"It is good that you talk, too."

Matthew shrugged then stared at the floor. He did not know what Jim meant by that last remark.

"Now play the mouthpiece again, slowly, legato, then put it back into the horn and play the same tune."

Matthew was able to do both. This time, the tune came out of the horn with better tone, although the kid was still inclined to try too hard.

"You see, Matthew, it is clear that you have talent and are capable on some level of playing somewhat advanced music. However, you have come to where you are without learning some of the basics. Before playing the Haydn, you must be able to play the simplest pieces and scales with good tone and good intonation. You have not learned how to do that yet. For this reason, you need to break things down and start over again, from the beginning."

"You heard me play the Haydn?

"Of course. The lesson began even with me upstairs. It began from the moment that you walked through the door."

"Wow."

"I would also say that you need to relax. It is hard to play when you are too revved up and intense."

Matthew stared at Jim with an astonished look on his face.

"In addition," Jim continued, "I could tell just by the tone of your voice on the phone the day you called me up that you were nervous. The way you blurted out, 'Hello! Is this Jim Stevens?' A lesson with me – a lesson with anyone – is not worth getting so worked up."

"I don't know about that," said Matthew.

"Really? What do you mean?"

"You are the first big-name teacher I have ever studied with. I have heard some of your recordings and really liked them, particularly the Mahler 5."

"Okay. So?"

"I also know you are a faculty member at seemingly every school on the planet, and that you are a conductor, too."

"And is that such a big deal?"

"I guess."

Jim chuckled a little, then answered, "The next time you come here, you don't have to get so uptight. You don't need to stumble into my house and be so in awe of me. We are just two friends getting together to make music. That is all."

"Okay." Matthew relaxed a little.

"And in your future lessons, we are going back to the basics. Maybe we will work on the Haydn. Eventually. But it is pointless for you to take on a piece like that when you

have trouble playing anything with good sound. This is not to say that you do not have ability. You do. But good sound is the number one building block of music making. That is what we need to work on. And we will."

The lesson went on and concluded without further incident, Matthew's tone improving a little. Like some teachers, Jim never once took out his instrument to play either for Matthew or with him.

When it was time for Matthew to leave, he felt a little more confident enough to talk to his first big-name trumpet teacher as the two stood at the door waiting for his father to pick him up.

"Mr. Stevens, I heard the Chicago Philharmonic on the radio last night. I know that there is another principal trumpeter in it. Was that you I heard or was that the other guy?"

"Oh, that was me, certainly."

"You sounded great."

Jim nodded. Matthew thought about asking Jim why, whenever he saw the orchestra on television, it wasn't Jim, but chose not to.

"You know," said Matthew, "It's really amazing that you are able to teach and conduct and do everything you do and are still able to play so well.

Jim nodded again. Matthew's dad's car pulled up onto Jim's driveway.

"That's my dad," said Matthew. "I gotta go. I'll see you next time, Mr. Stevens. Thanks for the lesson."

"You're welcome, Matthew. See you next time."

Matthew walked to the car at a faster pace than when he entered Jim's house. He was excited. He had stories to tell his father. And he also knew that he was welcome in Jim Stevens's house, which was cool.

Jim watched the car drive away and thought about the last hour. Oh, it was really nice and lovely for him to be some kid's hero. He would be lying if he said that he didn't enjoy it on some level. He certainly had his heroes during his student years. As he learned over time, heroes aren't always heroes. Matthew Cohen will learn that, too. Maybe not immediately. But he will learn. They all do.

He will learn a lot of things, Jim told himself. He will find out why it is almost always the other guy on first trumpet instead of him. He will see that on all television broadcasts, it is the other guy. He will wonder why he never sees him on television at all. If Matthew becomes an advanced player, he will hear from other players various Jim Stevens stories, some of them true. And he will watch and wonder when he retires a few years from now, at the age of 55.

When he will be asked to retire, Jim allowed himself to add. After which he will earn whatever he will earn teaching students and conducting semi-professional orchestras.

It is Jim on the Mahler 5 recording, all right. It dates from when he could still play. Back when he was at his best before the physical problems reduced him to nothing. When he eventually tells Matthew that the reason why he never plays at lessons is that he is saving up for concerts and rehearsals, he'll believe him. For awhile. And if he is able to

help him be a great player, Matthew will be thankful enough to not ask too many questions. Jim had students like that over the years.

Heroes aren't always heroes. But it was good to be one for now, Jim admitted to himself. It helped to soothe what little was left of his ego.